

quick facts

About...Measles

What is measles?

Measles is a viral rash illness that is very contagious. Currently, measles is rare in the United States, but outbreaks still occur as a result of travel to or from other parts of the world. Measles may cause serious complications, including ear infection, pneumonia, and encephalitis (brain swelling). In some cases, measles may be fatal, especially in children under 5 years of age.

What are the symptoms of measles?

People with measles generally appear very ill. Early symptoms of measles include:

- Runny nose
- Cough
- Drowsiness
- Loss of appetite
- Fever
- Spots inside the mouth resembling grains of salt (Koplik's spots)
- Increased sensitivity to light

Around the fourth day of illness, the fever usually increases (often to over 101°F), and a blotchy red (maculopapular) rash appears on the face and spreads downward to the rest of the body. The rash lasts about 4 or 5 days and then gradually fades in the same order it appeared.

How is measles spread?

Measles is spread by contact with the nose or throat secretions of an infected person. This can happen when someone coughs or sneezes near someone else or someone touches objects contaminated with nose or throat drainage. Measles is extremely contagious, and virus particles can remain viable in the air up to two hours.

Who is at risk for measles?

Anyone who has not received two doses of measles-containing vaccine is at risk for measles. While the United States does not have ongoing transmission of measles, measles remains a problem in many other parts of the world, including areas regularly visited for business and pleasure (including many parts of Europe). Everyone should have two doses

of measles containing vaccine (usually MMR, the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine). People traveling outside the United States should verify their vaccination histories. Children under the age of five, adults over the age of twenty, and people with weakened immune systems are at increased risk for complications associated with measles. Pregnant women who contract measles are at an increased risk for pregnancy-related complications, including miscarriage, premature delivery, and low-birth-weight in the infant.

How do I know if I have measles?

See your health care provider right away. If you have been exposed to someone with measles or you have symptoms that match those described above, your health care provider may test you for measles. Many other organisms can cause rash illnesses. If you have been vaccinated for measles, it is very unlikely that you have the disease.

How is measles treated?

Since measles is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not effective. Currently, there are no antiviral medications used to treat measles. Treatment focuses on relieving the symptoms of the illness.

How can measles be prevented?

The MMR vaccine is safe and effective for preventing measles infection. Most schools and licensed child-care providers require proof of vaccination or immunity to measles before entry. If you have not had measles and/or have no record of having the MMR vaccine, see your health care provider to decide if you should receive the vaccine. Two doses of vaccine normally provide lifelong immunity.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/measles/in-short-adult.htm>.

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